

Furman Magazine

Volume 59
Issue 1 *Spring 2016*

Article 16

4-27-2016

Kimberly Jackson '06: Chaplain, the Absalom Jones Episcopal Center in Atlanta

Brendan Tapley
Furman University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine>

Recommended Citation

Tapley, Brendan (2016) "Kimberly Jackson '06: Chaplain, the Absalom Jones Episcopal Center in Atlanta," *Furman Magazine*: Vol. 59 : Iss. 1 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://scholarexchange.furman.edu/furman-magazine/vol59/iss1/16>

This Article is made available online by Journals, part of the Furman University Scholar Exchange (FUSE). It has been accepted for inclusion in Furman Magazine by an authorized FUSE administrator. For terms of use, please refer to the [FUSE Institutional Repository Guidelines](#). For more information, please contact scholarexchange@furman.edu.

Y

Your church was established in 1957 to recruit black students to the Episcopal priesthood. Were you drawn to a spiritual vocation, and this church, for their roles in the Civil Rights movement?

KJ: Broadly speaking, I was drawn to the Episcopal Church because of the actions it took in the early 2000s to deal with issues of race and reconciliation, also issues of homosexuality in ordination. Being at my particular church—it allows for that intersection of talking to young adults and engaging in issues of social justice while also discerning where God is calling us in the world.

What is religion's role in shaping the conversation around issues like race?

KJ: Addressing major issues like racism and homophobia—that can feel really overwhelming. Especially in a country with 400 years of systematically oppressing black people. I think the role the church gets to play is to bring some hope into that space.

Do you feel that hope?

KJ: Absolutely. Almost every day there are these moments where I see another world is possible because I hear it come out of the mouths of young people as they name those changes.

Over the last year, there have been a number of racially charged incidents with white police—Eric Garner in New York; Michael

Kimberly Jackson '06

Chaplain, the Absalom Jones Episcopal Center in Atlanta

BY BRENDAN TAPLEY



Brown in Ferguson; Freddie Gray in Baltimore; Sandra Bland in Texas—not to mention the Charleston church shooting. You went to Ferguson. What isn't the media understanding about these incidents?

KJ: One thing I didn't understand was how deeply hurt and angry black people in Ferguson were, facing regular police brutality, mistreatment, and abuse. I listened to them talk about the smaller incidents of police pulling them over for no reason, yelling at them, calling them names. I listened to the mothers. Suddenly, this was a much larger thing.

White people have said they are surprised by these incidents, but black people often say they aren't.

KJ: Well, some black people are. I certainly am. One of the things we don't talk about is class, and as a middle-class African-American woman I don't live in a neighborhood where the police are terrorizing me at all. So, it was shocking for me.

People made much of a post-racial world when Barack Obama was elected president. Did we misinterpret that moment?

KJ: Absolutely. Yes, it was incredibly significant, and you can go back and look at all the images of black people pouring out on the streets and weeping with joy and astonishment that this even happened. But we never went back and evaluated why we were so astonished. I'd like to suggest that the reason we were was because we knew this was not a post-racial country. We knew racism was very alive, very real. And so it was extraordinarily shocking that Barack Obama was elected. Also, I think people kind of closed their ears to hearing

[about racism afterward] because they could look back at Obama and say, all is well, and you need to stop complaining because he made it, and so can you.

Would you say his election actually tapped a greater anxiety in white America about power?

KJ: I think white America was perhaps intimidated or concerned about their place and future in the establishment. There are instances of some white people doubling-down and making it clear that they are the true people of power. [They] did a lot to demonize Obama and make his job incredibly difficult. Racism was certainly a part of that.

The Black Lives Matter [BLM] movement has been criticized for rejecting the role of the

church, in particular what they charge as its "passive respectability politics"—peaceful protest, turning the other cheek, etc. As an activist in both arenas, what's your view?

KJ: I would push back a little on this—that the BLM movement is disassociated from the church. Some of that old establishment of the black church has rightfully been critiqued for its pandering to respectability politics. But there are a number of black clergy who have stood side by side with Black Lives Matter activists. We listen a lot more. There's a mutual respect. The clergy can enter into certain spaces that the Black Lives Matter leaders can't, and we understand it to be a mutual relationship we're working toward.

Do you agree with BLM that

there is a need to rebuild the black liberation movement?

KJ: My elders would say that the black liberation movement never stopped, so they would not agree that it needs to be rebuilt, simply that it needs to be continued. It has to have new strategies and tactics.

Do you have a sense of the new strategies?

KJ: One of the obvious new differences is that you've got a whole other class—poor and working-class black people—stepping up and demanding their rights. With that comes different rhetoric.

You provide campus ministry to Clark Atlanta, Morehouse, Morris Brown, and Spelman colleges.

KJ: My call to ministry came

out of a lot of conversations I had while I was at Furman. So, I very much understand that college is an opportunity for young adults to begin to discern whether ministry might be a place for them.

There's been a great deal of debate at colleges lately about whether freedom of speech should also mean the freedom to possibly offend. Have you experienced that in your higher education work?

KJ: I work in an all-black context, so this conversation doesn't happen around race as much as it does about sexuality. The question becomes: Does a student have the right to tell a person who is gay that they are condemned to hell? I sit in this place of asking the question: Are there ways we can talk about this so it's

FUmerical

Facts and figures about Furman

Preparation in college for what comes after college is a significant part of the Furman experience, and the university's culture of internships and preprofessional experiences among its students is well known for aiding in that preparation. We asked our undergraduate research and internship team to give us a sense of the numbers behind that culture.

180

Students who received funding to work collaboratively with Furman faculty in the summer of 2015



250

Greenville internship sites available to students in 2015-2016



130

Average number of students funded per year to present the results of their scholarship at national and international conferences



60

Percentage of faculty who mentored at least one student in full-time research between 2014 and 2015



500

Average number of students who intern throughout the year



81

Percentage of 2014 graduates reporting that they participated in at least one research or internship experience beyond the classroom

Postings from the Inter-webs

*What don't people
know about Furman,
but should?*

SEMSOPRANO:

*That students are not simply
taught facts but how to
reason.*

JGRUES:

*It's a wonderful institution
for veterans. Served
2006-2015, now a full-time
student.*

MEREDITHMDANGEL:

*People think it's still so
conservative and Baptist-
oriented. Not true. I was
introduced to so many
different viewpoints and
walks of life.*

JEFF O'SHIELDS:

*Furman has an excellent
financial aid office.
Prospective students should
never allow tuition cost to
"scare" them.*

CHRISTY ALLEN:

*I may be a little biased,
but we have phenomenal
libraries.*

FRAN SEVIER BROWN:

*After your kids graduate,
you miss FU almost as much
as they do!*

ELLAINE HERSCHDE:

*Oh my gosh, I felt the same!
Almost as sad on the way
home from graduation as
from freshman drop-off.*

**GINGER MAYBERRY
GRAVES:**

*Our son has received
tremendous support and
encouragement from his
professors. They have
gone above and beyond in
assisting him in and out of
the classroom.*

**KATY MUHLHAUSEN
HULLER:**

*Beautiful, safe campus...
and easy to get involved in
activities and clubs.*



Around the Lake | Q&A

→ not you personally con-
demning a person to hell?

How do you handle that?

KJ: It's a really difficult nuance, and the reality is feelings are still hurt. We've gotten to a place [historically] that certain things are just not tolerated. The "n" word is not going to be printed in Furman's newspaper. That's about protecting people who have had the word used against them. There are times when the referee comes in and says, yes, you have a freedom of speech, but we have a higher responsibility of loving and caring for all the people in our community. I want to protect the people who have been the oppressed group, but without honest dialogue, we don't get to a place where people understand where each other comes from.

Do you think politically correct speech achieves the opposite of its intent—meaning it censors or makes difficult conversations less honest?

KJ: When we start talking about race, these are deeply personal issues. It's hard for people to have these conversations without feeling personally implicated. It's asking a lot of people who have experienced hurt and oppression to be vulnerable to talk about that honestly, especially in spaces where they're not sure they're going to be heard or respected.

How do you do it then?

KJ: I'm teaching this class on race with a congregation that is 75 percent white and 25 percent people of color. I walk into the room and I say to them, here's one of my own stories of experiencing something that was hurtful. I'm being carefully vulnerable with my own story

**"ALL OF US BREATHE THIS
POLLUTED AIR. EVEN I AS A BLACK
PERSON HAVE FOUND MYSELF
SAYING SOMETHING THAT WAS
INAPPROPRIATE TO, OR ABOUT,
A BLACK PERSON."**

and that helps open up some honest dialogue.

There's a powerful sermon you gave in which you describe how even Jesus occasionally ignored those who wanted his intervention. You propose that we may not be aware of what needs our intervention because it's not visible to us. How do we make the invisible visible when it doesn't affect us personally?

KJ: Harvey Milk, the gay activist, told people who were gay, hey, you gotta come out of the closet. Everybody come out now and make your parents look you in the face. Make your colleagues—make the nation—see you. And change happened. Storytelling—that's where things are being made visible.

That's interesting—

KJ: All of us breathe in this polluted air. So, all of us are caught up in this system of racism, sexism, and homophobia. Even I as a black person have found myself saying something that was inappropriate

to, or about, a black person. [But] by naming it, I'm not just looking at the white, straight man across the altar from me and saying 'you, you, you.' I'm looking at him and he's looking at me and we're recognizing we're all caught up in this.

When it comes to solving something as large as 400 years of racism, is there a "win" whereby the movement would be able to say, we have achieved our goal?

KJ: The preacher in me wants to say that we are such a sin-filled country at this point that the end would look like the coming of the kingdom of God. That's sort of a despairing response, though. On a more here-and-now note, I would say for me—black children growing up in a world where they aren't afraid of being mistreated, that they have a level playing field, and that they never live with a fear that they aren't receiving opportunities because of the color of their skin or 'accident' of birth—that's the win. ●